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LEGENDS OF THE STARVED ROCK COUNTRY

BY H. A. RHOADS

The old world does not stand alone in the universe of legendary lore; nor is it the only source of our romantic inspiration. Our own country is filled with those phases of human activity which stimulate the imaginative, both in history and poetry. Everywhere ungarnered material can be found which will form the substance for poem and song, rough and unshaped, but ready for the poet and singer. One of the many spheres or areas of romantic inspiration in the United States is the Starved Rock region of the Illinois. The Atlantic coast with its explorations, colonial and revolutionary lore; the middle west and its pioneer; the Rocky Mountain world with the glamor of the days of '49, the south and the Civil War; the Texas border-land and other regions can contribute to the realm that influences men's ideals and develops their creative imaginations.

In this Starved Rock region we have the tale of the early French explorer and the lost empire of New France. In attempting to put into cold historical prose the legends that are found in this region, one must remember that he should keep close to historical fact, and not wander too far into the realm of the romantic. So in presenting these legends, collected from many sources, it seems best to associate them with history as to their probable foundation and source.

In order to best understand the legends about our new State Park and its romantic associations, it is necessary to give a brief outline of its history—geological, ethnological and historical. Geologically, the Illinois River was once the outlet of the Great Lakes into the Mississippi. When the Niagara River broke through the heights at Lewiston and formed Niagara Falls, the Illinois dwindled to a mere memory of a great water artery.

The flood that once poured down into the Mississippi had carved its way through the hills into a deep wide channel. When the waters receded, they left standing, bold and precipi-

tous, a number of great promontories. Carved, as they were, from sandstone, they stood in bold relief from the rest of the high bluffs. Of these, Starved Rock was one. Rising one hundred and twenty-five feet from the river, it is a circle in form and contains a little more than one acre of ground. It is accessible only from the south side and is covered with trees and shrubs. Across, and one mile up the river, is Buffalo Rock, larger and almost as picturesque, while along either side of the Illinois River are high elevations of a similar nature.

On both sides running back from the bluffs are broad prairie lands, feeding the Illinois region. Near it are the Big and Little Vermilion and Fox rivers, and Bailey, Otter, Eagle, and Covall creeks, which are all heavily timbered with black and white walnut, elm, ash, hickory, maple and sycamore. About are numerous natural springs. Quantities of glacial drift, consisting of clay, gravel and granite boulders, are found everywhere. Especially fitted by nature for man's habitation, it early was the home of the mound builders, whose mounds and relics are found everywhere, and was also once the seat of the Illinois federation of Indians.

These Illini consisted of the Peorias, Moingwenas, Kaskaskias, Tamaroas and Cahokias, who formed a powerful confederacy. In summer they went as far west as Dakota country to hunt. In winter they congregated near Starved Rock.

Developing the legends of this country we shall start in with their great village near the rock, known to the French as La Vantum, La Vanta ("the washed"), and Kaskaskia. This village, for ages the seat of the Illinois confederacy, was located west of the rock south of the river, and furnished them with a winter home. The Jesuit Father, Claude Jean Allouez, found here a community of from three hundred to four hundred wigwams, and of eight thousand souls.

Here was fought the great battle between the Iroquois and the Illini. Here took place the desecration of the Illini dead, during one of the Iroquois raids, and here also was the Jesuit mission under Father Claude Jean Allouez. Tradition has it that La Vantum was strangely deserted from time to time. This can be easily explained by the shifting aboriginal population when they went, men, women and children, on their summer hunts. The name has a happy association in legend, being called La Vantum, "the washed," by the French, because of the clean sandy soil washed each spring by the river.

The name Kaskaskia has been confused in history with the newer Kaskaskia on the Mississippi. This is probably due to the fact that in 1700 the mission was moved to the river town of the same name.

The first legend of importance about La Vantum, in historical order, was the great fight of the Iroquois and the Illini. Aboriginal history has it that it started in the old ambition of the Iroquois to be a great power in the Indian world. Its date is uncertain, probably after the coming of the French. The tale is that the fight started at La Vantum. The Illini being weak, crossed the river and started toward its mouth in retreat while the invaders followed on the other side. By day and night the flight and pursuit continued. They were constantly in sight of each other. The battle calls and camp fires were always on opposite sides of the Illinois. The retreat was finally ended at the Mississippi by the Iroquois turning back.

Another story handed down is the fight of the "Six Hundred." The tribes of the Miamis and the combined Pottawatamies and Kickapoos, being at war for years, met in counsel and chose three hundred warriors to fight out their differences before the two tribes. After a three days' fight, five of the former and **seven** of the latter were left. The five **fled** and the victors were **ever** after the heroic figures of their tribes. This took place after the French had abandoned Starved Rock. Some of the heroes' names are recorded in history. Among ~~them~~ are Shady and Moschel, etc. Again, at La Vantum, Tonty defeated the Iroquois, as Champlain did, with **firearms**. Here in 1679 was the great defeat of the **Illini** by the **same** tribe of the six nations. The former lost **three** hundred to four hundred killed and nine hundred prisoners. And here once more the Iroquois, during the raid, **found the inhabitants** on a hunting trip, and being seized with **an uncontrollable** savage anger, dug up the dead and scattered the remains everywhere. Tonty found the place a charnel house on one of his trips. Possibly more legendary lore is found about Starved Rock than anywhere else in this Illinois region.

The rock was first seen in 1673 by Louis Joliet and Jaques Marquette, two French explorers sent out by Jean Talon, Intendant at Quebec. Joliet was born in 1645 in Quebec, the second son of Jean Joliet. He was educated in Jesuit College in the city of his birth. In 1673, with his priest companion Marquette, he ascended the Fox River at the portage of the Wis-

consin, and crossing, descended the latter into the Mississippi. They journeyed down the stream to the Arkansas and back up the Illinois into the Starved Rock country.

His religious associate was born at Laon, France, in 1637, and came to the new world in 1666, where, under Father Dablon, he worked among the Indians. After building a chapel at Mackinaw, he joined Joliet on this expedition.

About these two names hang the mists of romantic tradition, and more especially that of Marquette; the happiest one of which is the story of the devotion of his savage converts. Marquette having died and been buried in the wilderness, his devoted followers removed his remains and casing the bones in birch-bark, and after a long and tedious journey up the Illinois and along the edge of Lake Michigan, they buried him under his own chapel. The tradition runs that several scores of canoes made up the funeral cortege and that most of the traveling was done at night to avoid their enemies, the Iroquois.

Rene-Robert-Cavalier, *Sieur-de-La Salle* is the next heroic figure to come into history in this region. Born in Rouen, France, in 1643, the son of a rich merchant, he was educated in church influences, but later left to become a trader at La Chine, near Montreal. Learning from the Indians of the Ohio River, he obtained authority from Governor de Courcelles and Intendant Talon, and in 1669 is said to have discovered the Falls of the Ohio, at what is now Louisville. This present fact or fiction, as it may be, is still in dispute and forms the basis of a traditional visit of a white man to this region. After returning to Canada in 1671, after a visit to France, with Henry De Tonty and about twenty men, late in December in 1679, he reached the Illinois country, stopping at La Vantum. Early the next year (1680) he built a fort near Peoria Lake, and at his command one was built by Tonty on Starved Rock, and one at Wedron.

He was a heroic figure in those frontier days, as he gathered about him a confederation of Indian tribes which he ruled as a forest patriarch. One has no idea in this present age of the amount of influence wielded in this territory. Countless stories are told of the forest court that he must have held on the rock where he dispensed justice, bought furs, ruled his

savage tribes and planned a greater New France. This phase of his life is brimming full of legendary story. His great fight with his enemy La Barre, his hurried trip to France to combat his enemies at the court, his fights with the Recolet Brothers, he being a Jesuit; his quarrel with the two Pillette brothers, who formed a rival trading post at Buffalo Rock, near Starved Rock, have come into history. The greatest romance of all his life is probably his death. When but forty-three years of age, on a colonization scheme, he was killed on the Trinity River in Texas by his own men. The mystery of his death has appealed to many an imagination in song and story.

Next in this group of figures is Henry de Tonty, La Salle's lieutenant, son of Lorenzo de Tonty. He early entered French military life and at an early age, was a veteran in the wars of Sicily. A pleasant story associated with him is his first meeting with La Salle in Paris. As kindred spirits of adventure in some out-of-the-way Parisian wine shop, he boldly entered into La Salle's schemes, and for years dominated Starved Rock as his military leader. Having lost a hand in the wars in Sicily, he had the missing member replaced with one of iron. "Main-de-fer," "hand-of-iron," he was called by the Indians, who feared him and yet respected him. A story goes that a buffet from his iron hand was to be feared almost as much as a shot from his firearm. His devotion to La Salle has in it all the poetry of Richard Cœur-de-Lion's faithful attendant in the Holy Land.

A little-known story of Tonty's life is his expedition in 1688, with four Frenchmen and three Indians, to secure the Rio Grande country for France, as war had broken out between that country and Spain. He reached the Red River and returned in April the next year.

One of the happiest traditions about Starved Rock is that of Tonty's return. The Indians claimed that years after the rock had been abandoned, an old, bent, white-haired man came to the rock and seeking its highest spot in the autumn twilight, passed out into the next world. He was buried by a few aged savage patriarchs, and thus tradition says old "main-de-fer" dreamed out into the twilight his last hours where once he had ruled supreme. *Cold history says that Tonty died of yellow fever in the south, but we have the legend, so let it stand.

*Tonty probably died in 1704 at Fort St. Louis, near present site of Mobile.

A very pretty story is told of the Jesuit mission on the rock and its great gilt cross. It goes that one of the fathers erected a huge cross, thirty feet high, that could be seen for miles up and down the river by travelers by water. Later another cross was erected at the village of La Vantum.

The next story which clings about Starved Rock is the one that gave it its name. After the Pontiac conspiracy had verged into mist, the crafty leader still had visions of a great Indian confederation.¹ At the great mound at Joliet, while in a harangue to the gathered tribes, he is said to have spoken disparagingly of the Illini because they had not joined him in their great conspiracy. Angered by his remarks, an Illini chiefman cleft his skull. Immediately all of those under Pontiac's old-time influence vowed swift vengeance on the Illini and besieged them on the rock. After a period of fighting, hunger, thirst and exposure, they eventually starved to death.

A legend that follows this is one of the "Silent Men." Eleven Indians are said to have escaped from the rock in canoes during the thunderstorm, and being pursued down the river to St. Louis by their enemies, they were given refuge by the whites, who refused to give them up to the pursuers. Ever after they were known as the "Silent Men," and would never speak of their past, nor use the name of their tribe. So far as tradition has it, the Illini tribe passed out of existence with them, although history tells us that there were branches of it who signed government treaties and who moved west in 1820. Some of them joined the Miamis in war with the United States and suffered defeat by Mad Anthony Wayne, in August, 1794, concluding a treaty in August, 1795, and settled in Kaskaskia. As late as 1872, there were still forty of the ancient confederation alive.

One more person is said to have gotten from the rock by jumping off and swimming with a broken leg out of the reach of his enemies. Tradition is that two traders saw the buzzards flying about the rock while coming on a fur trading trip and fled down the river in terror. Another tale is that the Indians, after the victory, met near Wedron, and celebrated with a great feast.

Buffalo Rock has a host of traditions about it. The most prominent, or the one most referred to, is the two Pillette² brothers,

¹ Pontiac was killed at Cahokia in 1769, according to common belief.

² Pilet or Pilette brothers, Peoria and Illinois traders.

who built a fort there in opposition to La Salle and had a fur trading post. After the French occupancy of the rock, Michel Accault (or Accau) married Mary, the daughter of an Indian chief, as was common in those days. The unusual thing about it is that she, being a Christian, refused to marry the Frenchman until he had joined the church, and it is recited that the union was a very fortunate and happy one.

The tale of the lost copper mine is another thing that stirred the imaginations of the early explorers. The statement is made that Patrick Kennedy and several French Coureurs-de-bois hunted for this mythical copper mine for some time, but found no trace of it. The chances are that this lost treasure-trove was but the whisper of Indian tradition concerning the Lake Superior region.

The American fur traders in 1816 established several forts in this region and the suggestive conflicts with the Hudson Bay people is also lightly touched on in tradition.

The way to China or Cathay was a great stimulus for the early French explorer, and the Rapids at La Chine got their name from this alluring will-o'-the-wisp exploration. One of the early French explorers is said to have appeared in robes of State, when he expected to meet the great Chinese dignitaries and only found savage aborigines.

The trail of the beaver skin, which kept the wilderness in constant turmoil for a number of years, also served as a source of a large number of traditions, such as the quarrel over the supremacy of Fort St. Louis, the constant warfare between La Salle and his enemies, and the free lance fur traders, the Pillette brothers. An obscure tradition called Ulah, the story of Starved Rock, is also associated with legendary lore, with the usual accompaniment of two sweethearts of different tribes, a pursuing father and a final fierce struggle on the summit of the promontory, ended in the death of the two lovers. As every rock landscape must have its lover's leap, so has this region, although the names are unknown to memory. A bold cap of rock east of Starved Rock was the traditional place where the maiden cast herself in the Illinois river below.

Some of the most obscure legends which have not been touched upon are associated with the names of La Salle, Joliet, Marquette, Tonty, Frontenac, Talon, Hennepin, Zenobe Membre, Riborde, Allouez, the two Pillette brothers, Michel Accau, La Barre, La Forrest, De Lhut, San Bastian, De Joutel, Shab-

bona, Sugar, Shaty, Shick-Shack, Meshal and others. These French and Indians were the prominent figures in those old days of tradition. There are countless tales told about this section and a number which are associated with pioneer days, but of these we have no great interest at the present moment. The customary prairie bandits, coiners, horse stealers, and gamblers, formed the usual background to our setting of pioneer days.

In respect to the legendary lore of Starved Rock very little that is good and a great deal that is mediocre has been written. The historians from the time of the Jesuit Relations to the present time have apparently done a very satisfactory work, but the romanticist is yet to come. Mrs. Catherwood, in her story of Tonty, and other works, has touched lightly on this region; Jones, with her "Ulah," has given us an extended poem of some length. The present day historians, such as Osman and Goodell, are really doing more meritorious work than any, at present, but the true beauty of the poetry of this region remains yet to be coined into thought.

While editor of the "Prairie State" magazine, the author of this article made an effort to put into verse the most prominent legends and legendary figures of this section in a way, and also to collect legendary data, but until the stimulating influence of Starved Rock as a state park came, very little was done to interest the outside world in this region. The day will come when Starved Rock will stand a monument high above all others in the northwest or in this section of the United States to the romantic and traditional history of our own country through the pen of some one who is yet to come.